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European Conference of the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts (SLSA)
at the Center for Literary and Cultural Research Berlin (ZfL) June 03 – 07, 2008

Stream 11: Art as Research

Panel:

Rethinking Representational Practices in Contemporary Art and Modern Life Sciences

Friday, 6th of June, 11:00–13:00

Chair: INGEBORG REICHLE (BERLIN)

The panel "Rethinking Representational Practices in Contemporary Art and Modern Life Sciences" will bring a group of international experts together to frame this increasingly important topic at SLSA 2008. The aim of this panel is to extend investigations of research in art and science with a focus on the complex role of visual representation in both fields.
By contrasting contemporary art with recent scientific developments, it is possible to demonstrate that art today not only serves to comment on science, but also represents a form of research and knowledge production in its own right, though one belonging to a radically different epistemological tradition. Moving beyond the postulated dichotomy of the "objective" sciences and the "subjective" arts, contemporary art shows us that art is no longer limited to the production of beautiful artefacts, but has established its role as a legitimate form of knowledge production in its own right. Today the engagement of art with science ranges from artists' iconological handling of scientific imaging to research projects executed as artistic endeavours by artists working in the laboratory. In the last two decades we have seen a number of artists leave the traditional artistic playground to work instead in scientific contexts such as the laboratories of molecular biologists. Such artistic interventions in genetics and biological forms have made possible new means of artistic expression and art forms, like 'Transgenic Art' and 'Bio-Art'. The use of biological materials by artists ranges from tissue engineering to stem-cell technologies and even transgenic animals, a phenomenon that raises ethical questions with regard to both scientific and artistic endeavours.
Speaker: Suzanne Anker (Prof. in the field of Fine Arts, New York, USA); Robert Zwijnenberg (Prof. in the field of Art History University of Leiden, NL); Thomas Söderqvist (Prof. in the field of History of Sciences in Copenhagen, DK); Ingeborg Reichle (Research fellow in field of art history in Berlin, GER)

SUZANNE ANKER (New York, USA)

Semaphores and Surrogates: Stand-ins and Body Doubles

From material processes to elusive patterns, artists and scientists devise myriad models of explanation. Sometimes illusionistically evocative, sometimes diligently computational and at other times sculpturally bounded, these conceptualizing tools have historically linked art and science. In addition, surrogates or substitutes are also fabricated from animate matter or otherwise employed "readymade". In the case of an animate surrogate, a stand-in body double, performs functions generally separated from personal utility. How do ethical parameters intervene in actions of this kind? This paper will explore the ambit of modelling options brought to the fore by considering the changing role of surrogates as research tools. From blow-up dolls to medical dummies, from tissue testers to photographic tableaux, this paper will focus on the variegated range of modelling techniques in both the artist's studio and the scientific laboratory. These facsimiles will be explored as conceptualizing mechanisms expanding the possibilities for dimensional invention and intervention.

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ROBERT ZWIJNENBERG (Leiden, NL)

Bio-Art: Concepts and Matter

In contemporary arts practices dealing with living biological systems, artists on the one hand get their hands wet by actually working with living material in a technological environment, on the other hand they often explain their artistic practice as essentially conceptual in nature. They seem to translate or to transform a technological practice into an artistic practice or to relocate it to the artistic realm, and it is assumed, that in this transformation or relocation, the bio-artists distance themselves from and/or undermines the technological rhetoric and ideology at work in this practice. For instance, the *Disembodied Cuisine* from the *Tissue Culture and Art Project* is described as carrying ad absurdum the realization of technological hopes and wishes of tissue engineering, by using this technology within a performative installation, i.e. an artistic environment. The artistic strategy behind Eduardo Kac's Alba is often compared to the strategy behind Duchamp's *fountain*. In these accounts, the emphasis is on

artistic processes (of relocating, transformation, etc.). In my paper, I will discuss the question if technologies and biological materials used by bio-artists are changed or affected by these transforming processes, in the sense that they acquire new or lose qualities. Or are there qualities that persist through an artistic transformation? Do technological practices and biological material have an essence that is unaffected by a change of context?

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THOMAS SÖDERQVIST (Copenhagen, DK)

Five (Good and Bad) Reasons Why a Medical Museum Director Wants to Bring Art and Science Together

The recent conjunction of art and science discourses and practices has also reached the museum sector. In addition to their traditional concerns with narrativity and didactics, museums of science, technology and medicine are increasingly showing interest in ways of integrating art work (including wet-art) into their collections and exhibitions. But why are museums of STM interested in art and the aesthetic dimension of science and science communication? What can art works add to collections and exhibitions? In this paper I will discuss a number of good (and bad) reasons for this 'aesthetic turn' in the STM museum sector: political, economical, epistemic, cultural and existential.

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(Chair): INGEBORG REICHLE (Berlin, GER)

Art in the Age of Technoscience

Today many scientific representations – like the DNA-double helix – are no longer neutral descriptions of genetic entities but rather have advanced to the status of ornaments and bearers of a mythological and religious meaning of 'life itself'. Already around 1900, early representatives of the young discipline of genetics exhibited a tendency to indulge in utopian rhetoric, conjuring up visions of a 'biological art of engineering' or a 'technology of living organisms', which did not confine itself to the shaping of plants and animals but aspired to setting new criteria for human coexistence and the organisation of human society. Then, as now, the heralds of this 'biological revolution' were predicting nothing less than a second creation; this time, however, it would be an artificially created bio-industrial nature that would replace the original concept of evolution.
Many art exhibitions in recent years have taken as their central theme the effects of this 'biological revolution' on a person's self-image and on the multi-layered interrelations between art and genetics. However, in contrast to the first encounters between art and genetics, which began in the early twentieth century with art's visual and affirmative engagement with genetics, today these 'scientific' images are being decoded through the linking of art and the images of the life sciences, resulting in a new way of reading them. Artists are taking the terminology of the realm of art and applying it to the technically generated images of molecular biology or other life sciences, thereby questioning their claim to objectivity and truth and making them recognizable as a space where other fields of knowledge and areas of culture may also be inscribed. With the aid of an *iconography of images from science*, an attempt is being made to decipher the cultural codes that these images additionally transport.

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